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Abstract

My name is Annie and when I was eleven I went to my Gran's for a holiday. I packed my own bags and caught the train by myself to the country town where she lived in a big house with verandahs all around.

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My name is Annie and when I was eleven I went to my Gran's for a holiday. I packed my own bags and caught the train by myself to the country town where she lived in a big house with verandahs all around.

I loved my Gran very much. She never fussed, and she'd cook meringue pies every night if she thought that would make you happy. The only thing I didn't like about Gran's was the outside loo. It was a little wooden house down by the back fence and you had to do your business in a can, which only got taken away once a week by a man with a horse-cart.

Gran kept the toilet very clean. She scrubbed the wooden seat with Phenol and hosed down the floor. But it still smelt, and when there were extra people in the house, like there were on these holidays, the can filled up very quickly and you always worried about being *splashed* when you did anything.

And on these particular holidays, there was cousin Stanley to put up with as well. He'd always been an obnoxious child, but now that he was going to school, he was ten times worse. He haunted the toilet; you couldn't go without him noticing and following you.

He'd spy on me through my bedroom window too, and once I caught him going through my suitcase. He thought it terribly funny, knowing what colour bloomers I wore. He was the type of little boy who stuck pins in flies so he could sit and watch them wiggle.

And the reason he kept on doing these things was because no one stopped him.

His mother, my Aunt Jeanie, dressed him in miniature suits and called him her precious little man. In her eyes he could do nothing wrong. But then she wore silly hats with tiny net veils draped in front of her eyes and I'm sure they interfered with her eye sight.

Stanley's father, my Uncle Horrie, puffed a pipe and was always surrounded by a smoke haze, and he called Stanley his 'great big boy,' when really the child was quite undersized.

At least Stanley's twin sisters, Bernice and Monica, knew what he was really like. They told him to his face he was a nasty, ugly little gnome. And he was!

After a week of trying to ignore him, I finally asked Gran, 'Could you please make Stanley stop following me?'

'Oh, if he's following you,' she said, 'you know what that means - he likes you.'

It meant nothing of the sort.

'He follows me to the toilet even,' I was forced to tell her.

'All little boys do that sort of thing,' she said. 'You shouldn't let it worry you.'

'But he sits outside and listens,' I said.

Actually, he did worse. When I'd come out, he'd dart inside and look in the pan. Then he'd race off and tell Bernice and Monica what I'd done.

'He listens to you too, Gran,' I said and I'm sure she thought I was making it up.

'It doesn't do to be too touchy about these things,' she said.

'But *you'd* only have to tell him to behave and he would,' I said. 'He listens to *you*.'

I might as well have asked the table for help, or the rolling-pin she was using to roll out biscuits for afternoon tea.

'He'll only be here for another week,' she said. 'Surely you can put up with him till then?'

It seemed I would have to.

'Here comes rain-hail-or-shine! Rain-hail-or-shine!' Stanley's squawking little voice chanted from the verandah, and Gran said, 'Oh, if that's Hale, ask him has he had any lunch yet, there's a good girl.'

Like a *good girl* I did as I was asked. If only Gran had done the same.

Hale was at the bottom of the verandah steps when I came out. He was a boy from down the street and he came every other day to do jobs for Gran - chop wood or work in the garden - in return for which she gave him his lunch and two shillings a week.

He was about thirteen and wore knickerbockers that gaped at the knees because the buttons were always missing. Bernice and Monica thought him too young and too short for them to be interested in. Now that they were fourteen, and allowed to wear long skirts on Sundays, they thought themselves very grown-up, and preferred making eyes at the postman.

'Hale's just a child,' they'd say and I know they thought the same about me. On previous holidays I'd had marvellous fun with the girls, but this time, we hadn't played together once, not even the piano.

I wasn't especially friendly with Hale. He was a quiet boy, and he came to work, so we never talked much, but I liked him. He had a nice voice, husky like someone with a cold, and I thought it very manly.

And he hadn't had his lunch that day.

'Me Mum's still in bed,' he said.

'Still feeling poorly, is she?' Gran called from the kitchen.

'Yes, Mrs Ross!' he answered.

'Well, you'd better get this into you, then,' she said and gave me a tin plate with his lunch on it. It was the same lunch as we'd had: roast chicken, potatoes and peas, and she'd kept it warm on the back of the stove for him. She would load him up with biscuits too, before he went home. She was very generous like that.

But it never once occurred to her to let him eat his charity lunch in the kitchen instead of on the back verandah in front of everyone - Aunt Jeanie, Uncle Horrie, us girls and snake-eyed little Stanley.

While Hale sat on a fruit box, balancing his plate on his knees, Stanley stood in the middle of the verandah, with his legs braced wide apart in baggy shorts, and he watched every morsel that Hale raised to his mouth.

Hale glanced at the child now and then, but with no expression on his face to show whether he bothered him or not. But he must have! He would have bothered me, and I didn't have missing buttons or a pudding-basin haircut.

Every time Hale swallowed, and his adam's apple went up and down, Stanley would *gulp*. Then he'd stare intently, waiting for him to do it again.

Aunt Jeanie was there, lounging in a wicker chair, still wearing the same pretty frock she'd worn to church that morning. Uncle Horrie stood in a haze of pipe-smoke. The twins had their heads together, whispering. And no one said a word.

So I did.

I said quietly, 'Stanley, it's bad manners to stare,' and he turned on me and glared. Aunt Jeanie's far-away gaze hurried in from the garden and settled on me too. The twins held poses like they were having their picture taken, and Uncle Horrie coughed, clearing the smoke from in front of his face for a second. They all looked at me.

Then Aunt Jeanie laughed in a careless way like a cockatoo and went back to watching the irises and geraniums grow. The twins resumed their chatter, Uncle Horrie started puffing once more, and Stanley grinned, and began to wiggle and sing in his squeaky voice, 'Annie's got a sweetheart. Annie's sweet on Hale.'

I sat rigid, with my fists clenched. Hale went on eating, leaning over his plate, pushing potatoes and meat into his mouth and chewing fast. By speaking out, I'd only drawn attention to the fact that he was being stared at and I thought: he must hate me now.

To keep my eyes from watering, I fixed my gaze on the out-house down by the back fence, and pictured myself raising Stanley by the heels and dunking him in the pan, head first, again and again until my arms ached and he'd learned his lesson. The hideous little beast! It wasn't right that he should be awful to people and get away with it.

If Gran had been there, she might have agreed with me, but she came out when it was all over and settled into her favourite chair.

However, Hale said, in his quiet, manly way, 'I think I'll get them weeds out from round the dunny today, Mrs Ross,' and I realised he'd been staring at the out-house too.

'Whatever you think needs doing,' Gran said.

Hale finished his lunch and got up, and placed his plate on the verandah rail next to me, saying, 'Thanks Annie.' He nodded slightly to me while pulling his cap on his head. 'Thanks very much.'

I kept my hands clasped together in my lap and answered, 'You're welcome.'

Hale wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and went off into the garden, and Stanley started strolling around the verandah, parroting, 'You're welcome! You're welcome!' He snatched the serviette from beside his mother's tea cup and made a big display of wiping his mouth with it. And Aunt Jeanie smiled. *Her* little man knew bad manners when he saw them, *he* didn't need to be told. She sat up to blow him a kiss and he squawked, 'You're welcome!'

Bernice and Monica laughed and dashed off into the garden to titter behind the pear tree.

Aunt Jeanie lounged back again. 'Ah, to be young and carefree,' she sighed and closed her eyes.

I counted off the seconds in my head, promising myself I could leave the verandah when the *next* minute was up. And the next. I out-waited Stanley. He finally clamped down the steps and poked around among the pot plants. I waited a minute more, then left too and strolled along the pathway, towards the pear tree.

'Would anyone like to play skips?' I asked the girls. I thought *they'd* be on my side at least.

'Not today, Annie,' Bernice answered, and Monica found a pleat in her skirt that needed re-arranging.

I was on my own - like I had been all holidays. I walked further down the path, and as I approached little Stanley he made a pretence of blowing his nose, then thrust out his handkerchief towards me. In the centre was a glob of baby snails, crushed and still writhing.

I ran down, quite blindly, past the lemon tree in flower and snatched off a handful of blossoms so I could hold them to my face. And some

rose petals too, and a head of lavender, until all the smells together made me feel ill and I threw the lot away.

I bobbed down among the cabbages and searched for dew drops among the leaves. But Stanley was impossible to block out. I saw him dart over to Bernice and Monica, and whisper something to them, something that made them crane their heads away like a couple of white geese. They told him to *shoo*!

It was easy for *them* to ignore him, they were his sisters and there were two of them. Hale and I were quite on our own.

That's why we banded together the way we did, I think. We had to. And we had to do *something* because nobody else would do it for us.

Having shared the joke about me with his sisters, Stanley skipped down the path to tell *me* now why I was so ridiculous.

'Annie's looking for babies under the cabbages!' he sang as he jaunted past. Then, when he reached the toilet he added for Hale to hear, 'Annie's looking for *Hale's* babies under the cabbage leaves!'

He ducked inside, slammed the door, and went into his act of bouncing on the seat, making it clang against the can, and giving little shrieks, pretending he'd fallen in.

We'd all heard him do this before so I was surprised to see Hale stand up and lean towards the out-house, frowning.

Then he said to me quite loudly across the cabbages, 'Annie, do you think Stanley might have fallen in?'

His husky voice was so thoroughly convincing, for a moment I was fooled. Even Stanley chuckled from inside the toilet. Of course he hadn't fallen in. But Hale's gaze remained steady and I finally understood and scrambled to my feet.

'Hale and I think Stanley might have fallen in,' I called to the people on the verandah. I had no idea what Hale had in mind, but I knew he wanted me to do this.

Aunt Jeanie sat up. 'What is it, Horrie?'

Hale raised his voice. 'It's your little boy. I think he might have fallen in,' and he inclined his head towards the out-house again.

Uncle Horrie gripped the rail. 'Well, don't stand there like a fool boy, get him out! You're the closest!'

Hale dropped his garden fork, stepped round to the door and reached for the latch. They'd told him he could.

I remember seeing little Stanley's face when the door swung in. His mouth fell open and his eyes went so wide they flowed almost white in the dark. He leaned back as Hale advanced on him, and he did slip a little way down through the hole in the seat. Then, of course, he went a lot further down as Hale's hands came down on his shoulders.

I wasn't worried, I knew Hale wouldn't do anything awful. He was a strong boy and he was not about to let the child fall in all the way. But Stanley didn't know that and he let out a trembling squeal.

Having given him one good dunking, and one small dose of terror, Hale pulled him up again and backed out the door with him. He held him at arm's length by the shoulders of his coat and the child kicked and wriggled to get away, squirming like something pinned.

'Put me down!' he demanded.

Hale placed him on the path and stepped away. Stanley stood on his own, naked from his navel to the tops of his shoes, with brown mucky stuff running off his bottom and down the backs of his legs. He shivered, partly in terror, and partly in rage, I think. No sound came out of him.

Bernice and Monica came at a gallop with their skirts hitched high, and I ran too. Hale had done his part, now he looked to me. Now it was my turn.

I didn't laugh out loud. That would have been too callous. Anyway, Stanley had taught us a better way to do it. I held my hand in front of my mouth and shook my shoulders up and down, just slightly.

'He did it!' Stanley squealed. 'Hale did it! Hale pushed me!'

Little fibber! I was ready to say, but Aunt Jeanie arrived and started scolding, 'Don't be so silly! Hale got you out! Look what you've done to yourself!' She waved her hands at him as if warding him off. 'Horrie, do something!'

'Of course, dear,' Uncle Horrie said, took his pipe from his mouth and that was all.

Bernice and Monica kept looking at Stanley and looking away again, *peaking* at him.

'Go away!' Aunt Jeanie told them, and she told Stanley, 'For goodness' sake, cover yourself!'

His face went scarlet and he tried to run, and tripped on his shorts, and fell face down on the path, baring his mucky little bottom to the world.

Then Gran arrived. 'Give him here,' she said and pulled him to his feet. With her big, busy hands she peeled off his clothes, exposing his little hunched shoulders, his red neck and his tiny pink heels. He wriggled and squealed and cried out his protests, but she stripped him bare and marched him off to the sink at the back steps, where she hosed him down like a dog that had rolled in something nasty.

He stamped his little feet and screamed and wailed under the cold spray while we all watched, Hale included, still back on the path with his arms hanging heavy at his sides.

When Gran finally wrapped Stanley in her apron and carried him inside, he was sobbing. And I glanced again in Hales's direction, but he was gone.

Aunt Jeanie had Stanley out on the verandah again, that afternoon, in another miniature suit, but he was a much quieter little man this time. He kept his head buried in her lap, and when he did peek from the folds of her dress, his face was puckered and his eyes were red from crying and red with hate too.

I tried to talk to Gran about it.

'I shouldn't have laughed at Stanley,' I said.

'Oh! a bit of laughter never hurt anyone,' she answered, going *plonk! plonk!* with the biscuit cutter along a spread of ginger-bread dough.

'But he must have felt awful,' I said.

'Little boys aren't bothered by those things,' she answered, going *plonk! plonk! plonk!* cutting out row after row of ginger biscuits, all the same. 'What a funny little thing you are,' she chuckled, 'the things you think to worry about.'

And every second day, the rest of the time I was there, she'd stand out on the back verandah and ask, 'Now where do you s'pose Hale has got to?' She never knew why he didn't come back.

A slightly different version of this story is to be published in the 1991 Australian Children's Book Council Anthology *Into the Future*.